

Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Captain Florent A. Groberg
November 12, 2015

Please be seated. Good morning, and welcome to the White House. A little more than 3 years ago, as Captain Florent Groberg was recovering from his wounds as a consequence of the actions that we honor today, he woke up on a hospital bed, in a little bit of a haze. He wasn't sure, but he thought he was in Germany, and someone was at his bedside talking to him. He thought it was the lead singer from the heavy metal band Korn. *[Laughter]* Flo thought: "What's going on? Am I hallucinating?" But he wasn't. It was all real.

And so today, Flo, I want to assure you, you are not hallucinating. You are actually in the White House. Those cameras are on. I am not the lead singer from Korn. *[Laughter]* We are here to award you our Nation's highest military honor—distinction: the Medal of Honor.

Now, Flo and I have actually met before. 3 years ago, I was on one of my regular visits to Walter Reed to spend some time with our wounded warriors, and Flo was one of them. We talked. It turns out he liked the Chicago Bears, so I liked him right away. *[Laughter]* And I had a chance to meet his parents who could not be more gracious and charming, and you get a sense of where Flo gets his character from. It is wonderful to see both of you again.

I also want to welcome Flo's girlfriend Carsen, who apparently, Flo tells me, he had to help paint an apartment with just the other day. So there's some honey-do lists going on. *[Laughter]* His many friends, fellow soldiers and family, all of our distinguished guests. A day after Veterans Day, we honor this American veteran, whose story, like so many of our vets and wounded warriors, speaks not only of gallantry on the battlefield, but resilience here at home.

As a teenager just up the road in Bethesda, Flo discovered he had an incredible gift: He could run. Fast. Half-mile, mile, 2 mile, he'd leave his competition in the dust. He was among the best in the State. And he went on to run track and cross country at the University of Maryland.

Flo's college coach called him "the consummate teammate." As good as he was in individual events, somehow he always found a little extra something when he was running on a relay, with a team. Distance running is really all about guts, and as one teammate said, Flo could "suffer a little more than everyone else could." So day after day, month after month, he pushed himself to his limit. He knew that every long run, every sprint, every interval could help shave off a second or two off his times. And as he'd find out later, a few seconds can make all the difference.

Training, guts, teamwork—what made Flo a great runner also made him a great soldier. In the Army, Flo again took his training seriously—hitting the books in the classroom, paying attention to every detail in field exercises—because he knew that he had to be prepared for any scenario. He deployed to Afghanistan twice, first as a platoon leader and then a couple of years later when he was hand-picked to head up a security detail. And so it was on an August day 3 years ago that Flo found himself leading a group of American and Afghan soldiers as they escorted their commanders to a meeting with local Afghans. It was a journey that the team had done many times before, a short walk on foot, including passage over a narrow bridge.

At first, they passed pedestrians, a few cars and bicycles, even some children. But then, they began to approach the bridge, and a pair of motorcycles sped toward them from the other

side. The Afghan troops shouted at the bikers to stop, and they did, ditching their bikes in the middle of the bridge and running away.

And that's when Flo noticed something to his left: a man, dressed in dark clothing, walking backwards, just some 10 feet away. The man spun around and turned toward them, and that's when Flo sprinted toward him. He pushed him away from the formation, and as he did, he noticed an object under the man's clothing: a bomb. The motorcycles had been a diversion.

And at that moment, Flo did something extraordinary. He grabbed the bomber by his vest and kept pushing him away. And all those years of training on the track, in the classroom, out in the field, all of it came together. In those few seconds, he had the instincts and the courage to do what was needed. One of Flo's comrades, Sergeant Andrew Mahoney, had joined in too, and together, they shoved the bomber again and again. And they pushed him so hard he fell to the ground onto his chest. And then, the bomb detonated.

Ball bearings, debris, dust exploded everywhere. Flo was thrown some 15 or 20 feet and was knocked unconscious. And moments later, he woke up in the middle of the road in shock. His eardrum was blown out. His leg was broken and bleeding badly. Still, he realized that if the enemy launched a secondary attack, he'd be a sitting duck. And when a comrade found him in the smoke, Flo had his pistol out, dragging his wounded body from the road.

That blast by the bridge claimed four American heroes, four heroes Flo wants us to remember today: one of his mentors, a 24-year Army vet who always found time for Flo and any other soldier who wanted to talk, Command Sergeant Major Kevin Griffin; a West Pointer who loved hockey and became a role model to cadets and troops because he always "cared more about other people than himself," Major Tom Kennedy; a popular Air Force leader known for smiling with his "whole face," someone who always seemed to run into a friend wherever he went, Major David Gray; and finally, a USAID foreign service officer who had just volunteered for a second tour in Afghanistan, a man who moved to the United States from Egypt and reveled in everything American, whether it was Disneyland or chain restaurants or roadside pie, Ragaei Abdelfattah.

These four men believed in America. They dedicated their lives to our country. They died serving it. Their families—loving wives and children, parents and siblings—bear that sacrifice most of all. So while Ragaei's family could not be with us today, I'd ask three Gold Star families to please stand and accept our deepest thanks.

Today we honor Flo because his actions prevented an even greater catastrophe. You see, by pushing the bomber away from the formation, the explosion occurred farther from our forces and on the ground instead of in the open air. And while Flo didn't know it at the time, that explosion also caused a second, unseen bomb to detonate before it was in place. And had both bombs gone off as planned, who knows how many could have been killed.

Those are the lives Flo helped to save. And we are honored that many of them are here today: Brigadier General James Mingus; Sergeant Andrew Mahoney, who was awarded a Silver Star for joining Flo in confronting the attacker; Sergeant First Class Brian Brink, who was awarded a Bronze Star with valor for pulling Flo from the road; Specialist Daniel Balderrama, the medic who helped to save Flo's leg; Private First Class Benjamin Secor and Sergeant Eric Ochart, who also served with distinction on that day. Gentlemen, I'd ask you to please stand and accept the thanks of a grateful nation as well.

At Walter Reed, Flo began his next mission, the mission to recover. He suffered significant nerve damage, and almost half of the calf muscle in his left leg had been blown off.

So the leg that had powered him around that track, the leg that moved so swiftly to counter the bomber, that leg had been through hell and back. Thanks to 33 surgeries and some of the finest medical treatment a person can ask for, Flo kept that leg. He's not running, but he's doing a lot of CrossFit. I would not challenge him to CrossFit. *[Laughter]* He's putting some hurt on some rowing machines and some stair climbers. *[Laughter]* I think it is fair to say he is fit.

Today, Flo is medically retired. But like so many of his fellow veterans of our 9/11 generation, Flo continues to serve. As I said yesterday at Arlington, that's what our veterans do. They are incredibly highly skilled, dynamic leaders always looking to write that next chapter of service to America. For Flo, that means a civilian job with the Department of Defense to help take care of our troops and keep our military strong.

And every day that he is serving, he will be wearing a bracelet on his wrist, as he is today, a bracelet that bears the names of his brothers-in-arms who gave their lives that day. The truth is, Flo says that day was the worst day of his life. And that is the stark reality behind these Medal of Honor ceremonies: that for all the valor we celebrate and all the courage that inspires us, these actions were demanded amid some of the most dreadful moments of war.

That's precisely why we honor heroes like Flo, because on his very worst day, he managed to summon his very best. That's the nature of courage: not being unafraid, but confronting fear and danger and performing in a selfless fashion. He showed his guts, he showed his training, how he would put it all on the line for his teammates. That's an American we can all be grateful for. It's why we honor Captain Florent Groberg today.

May God bless all who serve and all who have given their lives to our country. We are free because of them. May God bless their families and may God continue to bless the United States of America with heroes such as these.

[At this point, Maj. Steven M. Schreiber, USMC, Marine Corps Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Maj. Andrew C. Steadman, USA, Army Aide to the President. Following the presentation of the medal, Maj. Gen. Paul K. Hurley, USA, Army Chief of Chaplains said a prayer.]

That concludes the formal portion of this ceremony. I need to take some pictures with the outstanding team members, as well as the Gold Star families who are here today. As Flo reminds us, this medal, in his words, honors them as much as any honors that are bestowed upon him. And on Veterans Day week, that is particularly appropriate.

I want to thank all of our servicemembers who are here today, all who could not attend. And I hope you enjoy an outstanding reception. I hear the food is pretty good here. *[Laughter]*

Thank you very much, everybody. Give Captain Groberg a big round of applause again. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:11 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Jonathan Davis, lead singer, Korn; Klara and Larry Groberg, parents, and Carsen Zarin, girlfriend, of Capt. Groberg; and Andrew Valmon, head coach, and Pete Hess, former teammate, University of Maryland track and field program. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the reading of the citation.

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Names: Balderrama, Daniel; Brink, Brian; Davis, Jonathan; Groberg, Florent A.; Groberg, Klara; Groberg, Larry; Hess, Pete; Mahoney, Andrew; Mingus, James J.; Ochart, Eric; Secor, Benjamin; Valmon, Andrew; Zarin, Carsen.

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